

The women of Arlington House, white and black, offer an important example of the complexity of antebellum southern social relationships. Mary Randolph Custis, Mary Anna Custis Lee, and Rosabella Burke are neither unique nor entirely representative of southern women's experience in this era. Like their northern counterparts, these women used the cultural options available to them to expand their own areas of autonomy. Rosabella Burke was naive in choosing to go to Liberia for liberty. The Custis/Lee women were frustrated in their roles because they could not escape the patriarchal model. That does not mean they were not active participants and shapers of their own worlds.

The scholarship on southern women has expanded rapidly in the last decade. The work of Ann Firor Scott, Catherine Clinton, Suzanne Lebsock, Deborah Gray White, and others in the 1970s and 1980s led to further research into the ways white and black women interacted and how issues of race and social relations were constructed. Among those books which have particularly altered our thinking about the women of Arlington House and southern women in general are Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Patricia Morton, ed. *Discovering the Women*

*in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens, GA., 1996); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women* (Lexington, Ky., 1995); and Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

These writers and others have emphasized domestic settings and the material culture of everyday life. The work is far from complete and interpreters of southern sites within the National Park Service have much to offer in interpreting southern women whose stories were as layered and nuanced as their lives really were.

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#### Note

\* Bell Wiley, ed., *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press), p. 192.

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Debbie Stetz

## Maria Israel and the Old Point Loma Lighthouse

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Women's contributions to the workplace have changed dramatically in the last 100 years. Career opportunities during the 1800s were typically of a maternal nature, such as nursing, teaching, or domestic service. Although today's women have climbed high on the corporate ladder, there are still only a handful of women who have held some very unusual jobs. One such woman was Maria Arcadia Alipas Israel, daughter of a prominent Spanish family in San Diego. For nearly 20 years, she helped the U.S. Lighthouse Service safely guide ships into San Diego's harbor.

The Old Point Loma Lighthouse at Cabrillo National Monument, constructed in 1855, functioned for 36 years, until it was permanently shut down and abandoned in 1891. Built at the harbor entrance high atop Point Loma, the lighthouse was usually shrouded in early morning low clouds and

fog and was eventually replaced by another lighthouse built closer to the water's edge. During its life span, 11 keepers were stationed at the lighthouse. The last keeper was Robert Decatur Israel, who lived there with his family for 18 years. For three of those years, his wife Maria officially served as the assistant lighthouse keeper.

Keeping the immense Fresnel lens lit throughout the night was the principal job of the keeper. But the most difficult part of the work was maintaining the equipment and grounds to exacting government standards. Detailed manuals issued by the U.S. Lighthouse Service outlined every acceptable, and unacceptable, activity around a lighthouse, from the correct procedure for trimming the wicks and polishing the glass, to being "courteous and polite to all visitors who conform to the regulations."

Maria Israel shared lighthouse duties with her husband and often kept the nightwatch. She

placed her rocker at the base of the circular stairway and passed the hours away with sewing and knitting while a beam of light from the lens in the tower illuminated the needlework in her lap. When the light was extinguished in the morning, the keeper donned a linen apron and began immediate preparations for the detailed cleaning and polishing of the lens and equipment. In keeping with the government rules, Maria was expected to keep the lighthouse and living quarters scrupulously clean, without any speck of dirt and dust. Every hour of the day and night was precious since her time was divided between the maintenance of the lighthouse and caring for her home and family. At times, teamwork was important. Tension welled up when ships drifted too close to the rocks of Point Loma and had to be alerted to their potential danger. Maria kept watch as Captain Israel ran outside to fire off warning shots from his shotgun. On February 15, 1876, the Lighthouse Board, for unknown reasons, replaced her as the assistant keeper.

The old Point Loma Lighthouse is a prim, two-story house, built in a traditional New England style with a parlor and kitchen on the first floor, two bedrooms on the second with a flight of stairs leading to the tower that housed the lens, and a full basement with a cistern below. Its location at the tip of Point Loma offers a spectacular view of the San Diego area and, just as today, has always attracted visitors to the quaint little lighthouse. But its distance from town and lack of available fresh water made life in the lighthouse less idyllic than it may have seemed. In 1874, a woman reporter from the San Diego Union wrote about her visit:

The lighthouse upon the extreme point of Point Loma is some fourteen miles from San Diego and is approached by one of the most beautiful drives in the world, to those who enjoy the cool, bracing breezes .... the buildings consisted of a very neat and commodious dwelling house surmounted by a tower fifteen feet high, also several immense sheds erected by the government for the purpose of catching rain-water .... Water and wood are items of considerable importance here, both having theretofore been brought from San Diego .... The vegetation around the lighthouse is very meagre consisting of very low, scrubby sage brush. Mrs. Israel told us that she had endeavored in vain to make a few of the most hardy flowers and vegetables grow, but the position was too much exposed to admit of cultivation....

Maria Israel was an industrious woman who successfully created a home from very limited resources. She had a knack for decorative arts and

spent a great deal of time stitching shawls, pillow shams, lace curtains and quilts. Tourists of the lighthouse often purchased the mosaic picture frames she constructed from colorful seashells her sons gathered from the tidepools. She tried to grow tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage and lettuce in the unforgiving clay soil around the lighthouse. She tended a grapevine from which she dried grapes into raisins, and grew hot peppers—a vital ingredient in her Mexican cuisine. If anyone embodied the old lighthouse, it was Maria Israel.

In 1995, the National Park Service celebrated the 140th birthday of the Old Point Loma Lighthouse with a major interior restoration. Bill Brown, Staff Curator of Historic Furnishings at Harper's Ferry, was brought in to carry out the job. He and his assistant, Andy Chamberlain, immediately embarked on a search of historic resources to help them recreate the lighthouse's interiors during its 1880 heyday. When Brown and Chamberlain chose materials and furnishings to represent that era, Maria Israel played a prominent role in their decisions. Brown explained:

We know that Mrs. Israel did sewing and mending and a lot of hand-work, and she did these two [seashell] frames. We've tried to set up various sewing materials of the period, and various kinds of things that were popular for women to do in the home, like hand-work .... I'm not saying that we like it, but that's what they did, and that is what is important, to not 'decorate'.

The National Park Service has successfully restored the lighthouse to its former glory days when it was a working lighthouse and a comfortable home. The "Light-Keeper" manuals are on the desk in the parlor. Part of the keeper's uniform is laid out on the bed upstairs, and the utility closet is filled with wicks and lanterns. Maria Israel's presence is also very apparent throughout the house with the lace curtains, Boston rocker, a basket of sewing, appliquéd pillows on the daybed, and strands of red peppers and garlic hanging in the kitchen. The beautiful furnishings throughout the lighthouse portray her role as a wife and homemaker, common positions for women of her time. But she was also a modern working woman—assistant lighthouse keeper—a position not many women, of any time, have had the privilege to hold.

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